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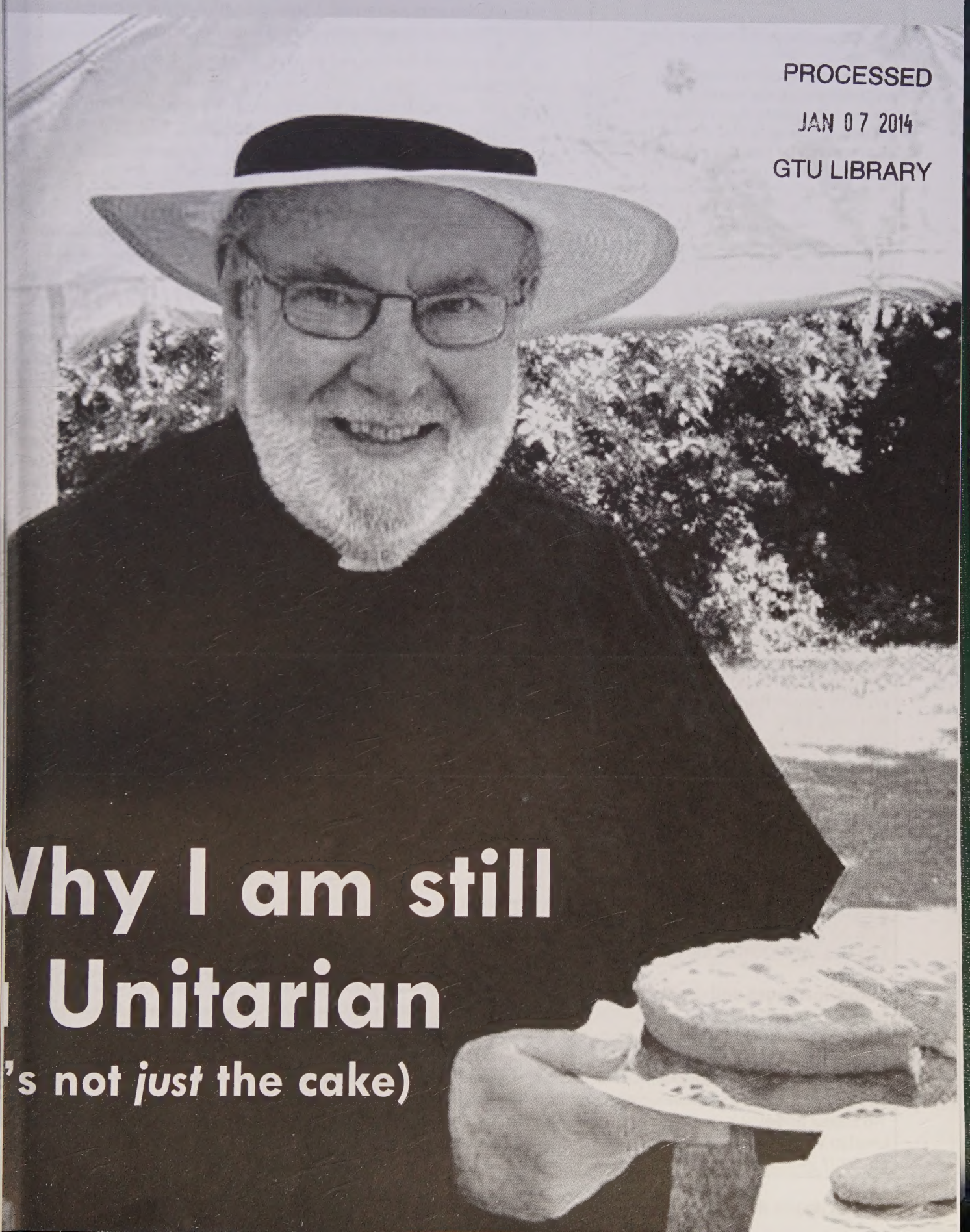
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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7833 4 January 2014

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**Why I am still
Unitarian**

's not just the cake)

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
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Inquiring Words

I hope that in this year to come, you make mistakes.

Because if you are making mistakes, then you are making new things, trying new things, learning, living, pushing yourself, changing yourself, changing your world. You're doing things you've never done before, and more importantly, you're Doing Something.

So that's my wish for you, and all of us, and my wish for myself. Make New Mistakes. Make glorious, amazing mistakes. Make mistakes nobody's ever made before. Don't freeze, don't stop, don't worry that it isn't good enough, or it isn't perfect, whatever it is: art, or love, or work or family or life.

Whatever it is you're scared of doing, Do it.

Make your mistakes, next year and forever.

— Neil Gaiman

Nobels recognise Unitarians



At Meadrow chapel, we are very proud of two of our newest members – David and Shirley Faraday – who have directly contributed to the work of the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize Winners – OPCW (the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons). David, a former Biological Weapons Inspector with the UN in Iraq, was recruited as a consultant to OPCW in 1999 and in collaboration with the University of Surrey, designed a programme which trains potential inspectors from across the globe to promote capacity building

for the peaceful use of chemistry. Every year, he and Shirley deliver part of this three-week programme, via their own company – Evolve Leadteam Ltd. Over the last 14 years, more than 350 delegates from over 100 developing countries have completed the programme.

Since it was set up in 1997, when the first 100 nations signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, OPCW has quietly undertaken 5,000 inspections and verified the destruction of 50,000 tonnes of weapons. Through their efforts, the world has been freed from a large number of deadly chemical weapons, and recent events in Syria are a reminder of the importance of this work.

David and Shirley started attending our chapel less than a year ago, but have already contributed much to the congregation, and are proving an inspiration to us all!

— Sheena Gabriel, minister of Meadrow Chapel, Godalming



Philippines appeal a great success

The Red Cross Unitarian Clara Barton Appeal raised **£16,324.79** by Christmas. Well-done everyone for your generosity! Unitarians are making a difference.

If you would still like to make a donation, send a cheque made payable to British Red Cross with 'Clara Barton Typhoon Appeal' clearly marked on the back and sent to: Laura Deacon, British Red Cross, 44 Moorfields, London, EC2Y 9AL.

Why I am still a Unitarian

A few eyebrows were raised when Unitarian General Assembly President **Bill Darlison** gave this talk at the event celebrating the Scottish Unitarian Association 200th Anniversary. Perhaps, here, it can begin a conversation.

The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you. 'Rilke

A few years ago, Denis Conway, the noted Irish actor, who is a prominent member of the Dublin Unitarian church, went to Zimbabwe to attend a reunion at a school where he used to teach. On the way back the plane was caught up in terrible turbulence which scared Denis witless, and he joined his fellow passengers in making frantic signs of the cross, and in mumbling hurried acts of contrition. 'There's one thing for sure, Bill,' he told me, 'there are no Unitarians when the plane's going down.'

I know what he means. Although I've been out of the Catholic Church for many years, I still feel that urge to bless myself before the plane takes off, but a decade ago, when I was very ill, Denis's observation seemed particularly apposite. During the long periods of inactivity, when I was too tired to read, but too alert to sleep, I found myself silently reciting the prayers I learned in infancy – the Hail Mary, and the Hail Holy Queen – prayers which, in the years of physical health and intellectual sophistication, I had sneered at, but which, in my infirmity, strangely became sources of great consolation. Specifically Unitarian prayers barely surfaced at all, and I had to agree with Denis: Unitarianism is by and large a fair-weather religion. It is 'religion lite', religion with all the specifically religious stuff taken out. The wife of the famous hymn writer, Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, was asked, 'Mrs Wendell Holmes, why are you a Unitarian?' She replied, 'Because here in Boston everybody has to be something, and a Unitarian is the least you can be.'

Why not walk away?

But this minimalism is just one of its inadequacies. For the past few months I have been typing up my old sermons, trying to get them into some sort of coherent shape, and during the process one thing has struck me most forcibly: in a good proportion of the sermons I have delivered over the past five years or so I have made critical comments about the Unitarian movement, and this has led me to ask myself why, if I am so critical of it, do I remain within it?

One possible reason for my consistent criticism is that I just happen to be hypercritical by nature, and that any organisation to which I belonged would come in for attack. This has been levelled at me before. When I was a Catholic, I spent so much of my time railing against the papacy and against sundry other aspects of Catholicism – intellectual, historical, and moral – that a colleague of mine accused me of actually enjoying the process. She said that without something to oppose, my life would be impoverished. I reluctantly agree that there is some truth in this observation, and it has to be borne in mind in what follows.

Wisdom of Bahaudin



Bahaudin Naqshband

A story by Idries Shah

A man came to Bahaudin Naqshband, and said: 'I have travelled from one teacher to another, and I have studied many Paths, all of which have given me great benefits and many advantages of all kinds. I now wish to be enrolled as one of your disciples, so that I may drink from the well of

knowledge, and thus make myself more and more advanced in the Tariqa, the Mystic Way.'

Bahaudin, instead of answering the question directly, called for dinner to be served. When the dish of rice and meat stew was brought, he pressed plateful after plateful upon his guest. Then he gave him fruits and pastries, and then he called for more pilau, and more and more courses of food, vegetables, salads, confitures.

At first the man was flattered, and as Bahaudin showed pleasure at every mouthful he swallowed, he ate as much as he could. When his eating slowed down, the Sufi Sheikh seemed very annoyed, and to avoid his displeasure, the unfortunate man ate virtually another meal.

When he could not swallow even another grain of rice, and rolled in great discomfort upon a cushion, Bahaudin addressed him in this manner: 'When you came to see me, you were as full of undigested teachings as you are now with meat, rice, and fruit. You felt discomfort, and, because you are unaccustomed to spiritual discomfort of the real kind, you interpreted this as a hunger for more knowledge. Indigestion was your real condition. I can teach you if you will now follow my instructions and stay here with me digesting by means of activities which will not seem to you to be initiatory, but which will be equal to the eating of something which will enable your meal to be digested and transformed into nutrition, not weight.'

The man agreed. He told his story many decades later when he became famous as the great Sufi Khalil Ashrafzada.

From 'Wisdom of the Idiots', by Idries Shah.

My most consistent criticism has been directed towards the intellectual nature of Unitarianism. I am not complaining about the fact that Unitarians are a very bright bunch of people. This is something to celebrate, not lament. It is a source of great pride to me to be able to tell people that Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, was a Unitarian minister, as was that great American man of letters, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Our movement has produced scientists, philosophers, poets,

(Continued on next page)

Is 'Unitarian' the least you can be?

(Continued from previous page)

novelists, and inventors in abundance, and it is almost certain that, relative to our size, we have more intellectual luminaries than any other religious organisation in the western world. The American novelist, Kurt Vonnegut, was a Unitarian, as is Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web. Throughout Britain, Ireland, and America you will find Unitarian churches which are gatherings of very thoughtful, very studious, and very educated people.

Where are the black Unitarians?

But they will also be very white and very middle class. Where are the rest? Where are the black Unitarians? When I lived in America (over 20 years ago), there were very few black Unitarians in San Francisco, New Orleans or San Antonio, the three cities in which I lived. Recently, I was in Egerton, in Bolton, and was delighted to see a man of colour in the congregation; but I was disappointed to find out that he was the local United Reformed Church minister, who'd come along to lend his support.

And even when religion was more fashionable than it is today – 100 or 200 years ago – Unitarianism never really attracted the working class. The poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who was a Unitarian for much of his life, wrote the following little piece in his journal.

A maid-servant of Mr Clarkson's parents has a great desire to hear (the Unitarian preacher) Dr Price and accordingly attended his congregation. On her return, being asked, well, what do you think, she replied, 'There was neither the poor nor the gospel.'

Coleridge comments: 'Excellent hit on the fine respectable attendants of Unitarian chapels, and the moonshine, heartless headwork of the sermons.'

Our very respectability and intellectualism put people off. We can seem to be all spirit and no soul. But Coleridge's 'moonshine, heartless headwork' is not just a criticism of our style; it reflects his mistrust of a purely intellectual approach to religion, which can be found among the spiritually enlightened in all traditions. Talking about religion and reading about it are academic exercises, they are not spiritual activity, and they can give the illusion that, as knowledge increases, so does wisdom. But learning and wisdom are not synonyms; scholarship does not automatically lead to virtue or enlightenment; and wisdom is not the exclusive preserve of the learned. Sadly, there is no salvation by bibliography. As the Sufi story on page 3 illustrates, the Sufis are particularly suspicious of intellectual religion because it can foster an arrogance which is inimical to genuine spiritual progress. 'Load a donkey up with books,' they say, 'and it is still a donkey.'

Sermons are bloodless, bland

There's often something cold and bloodless about Unitarian sermons. They can be bland and discursive, dithering and inoffensive. Sometimes they are so academically rigorous that they ought to be offered with footnotes. In addition, as the 19th-century American minister, Theodore Parker, said: 'Unitarianism is too often a religion of pale negations'. Too often the preacher will be at pains to tell us what he or she doesn't believe in, provoking me to scream inwardly. 'Tell me what you do believe! Tell me what it is that gets your pulse racing! Tell me what you live for, and what you would die for!



From Samuel Taylor Coleridge's journal:

A maid-servant of Mr Clarkson's parents has a great desire to hear (the Unitarian preacher) Dr Price and accordingly attended his congregation. On her return, being asked, well, what do you think, she replied, 'There was neither the poor nor the gospel.'

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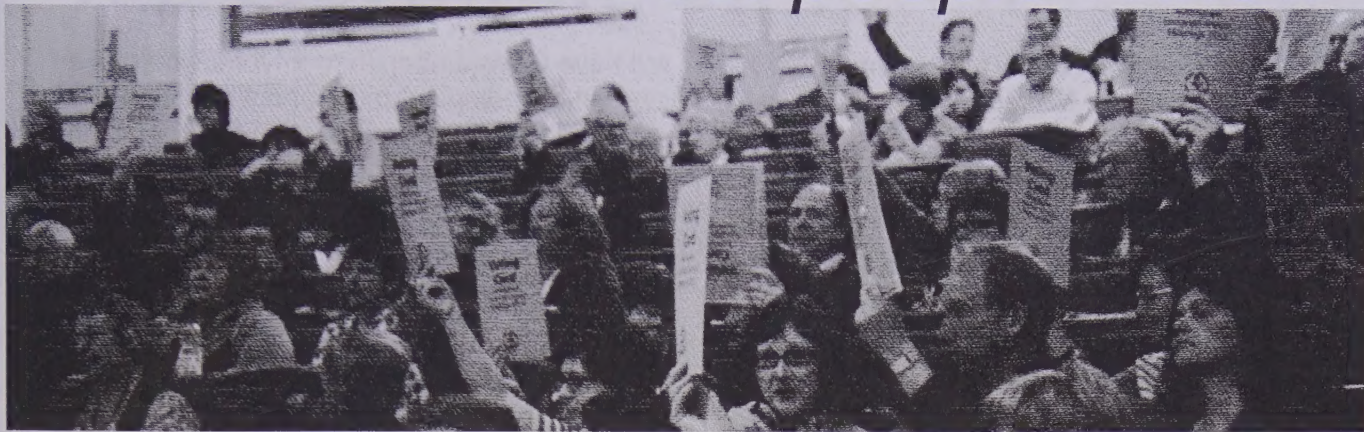
Portrait by Washington Allston, via Wikimedia

Give me yourself, and not your doubts or your erudition'.

And coupled with our intellectual snobbery is our intellectual timidity. We fool ourselves into believing that we are intrepid explorers in the field of thought, because we have cast off the religious superstitions of our ancestors, but we have really just swapped one set of superstitions for another. A superstition is a belief or a custom to which we adhere in the absence of any real proof of its validity or its efficacy. And our contemporary superstitions are the superstitions of scientism, and the superstitions of political liberalism, the naive beliefs that science has somehow unlocked the mysteries of existence, and that the human race is gradually but inexorably headed towards some political and social Shangri La. Both are unfounded beliefs, clung to with hope rather than demonstrated with evidence. Even a cursory acquaintance with the philosophy and history of science should disabuse us of the first; and

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Unitarians: the best people I know



(Continued from previous page)

watching the nightly news should cure us of the second.

And, since the assumptions of contemporary materialistic philosophy have, to some extent at least, become the assumptions of Unitarianism, we have narrowed the scope of our explorations to those prescribed and allowed by the scientific gurus of our time. Our excessive rationalism has left us with a soulless universe of purely material entities, with little room for God, and no room for miracles, or for life after death, and even when our experience demands that we question these materialistic assumptions, we are reluctant to do so, for fear of stepping outside the boundaries of the prevailing intellectual mind-set. Our forebears were fearless in challenging the religious and cultural assumptions of their time; some went to jail, some were even executed. Dissenting was costly. Where are the dissenters now? Who dares to challenge the magisterial pronouncements of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens, the bishops of the new religion of irreligion?

We are creating a pseudo-religion

Thomas Huxley, in a letter to Charles Kingsley in 1860, wrote: 'Sit down before fact as a little child; be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing'. Is this injunction followed by brave Unitarian explorers of the world and of the spirit? Hardly: for many of us, the exploring is done, and we have been trying, post-Darwin, to create a pseudo-religion of the well-heeled and the inveterately optimistic, dedicated almost exclusively to social amelioration. And the attempt has failed, as our declining numbers indicate. Why stay then? It's not just that there's nowhere else to go, although this is true. Someone has said that if you shook up America, all the loose bits would end up in California. And I say that if you shook up the world, all the loose religious people would end up in Unitarianism. But there are more substantial reasons. I'll briefly give three.

The first is purely personal. Unitarians are simply the best people I know. In Britain, America, and Ireland, the people I warm towards are Unitarians. Some are Unitarians even though they don't go to church, and would repudiate the label. There's something about that spiritually dangerous mix of agnosticism, indecision, talkativeness and eccentricity, which is wonderfully appealing. And, in addition to being good company, Unitarians are, for the most part, honourable people. A member of the Dublin congregation said some years ago that he had never heard any moralising 'behave yourself' sermons in the Dublin church, but that there were people there to whom he would gladly and confidently entrust his life. I agree with

him. Our communities are full of the best people, and the community itself is the womb of salvation and sanctification; abstract principles are irrelevant by comparison.

Unitarians tolerate dissent

The second reason I stay, concerns the nature of the movement itself. Can you imagine any other religious organisation in the whole wide world which would tolerate one of its spokespeople – in fact, this year, its most prominent spokesperson – attacking its basic principles in the way I have just done? In other organisations there would be hurried emergency meetings of an executive committee, calls for resignation, even assassination attempts. But we don't operate in that way. We are a democratic movement. Sometimes, when immersed in the slow, cumbersome, and maddening processes of democracy, I wish, momentarily, that we did have cardinals and bishops to tell us what to do, and what to think, but I know that our way is the right way. Power resides within the community. No local decision can be taken without the approval of the elected managing committee, and no decision of importance can be taken without the approval of the whole congregation. No national decisions can be taken without the approval of the whole denomination. Such unique freedom, and such responsibility, more than adequately compensate for any theological or liturgical shortcomings.

Change needed now

And, finally, whatever shortcomings there are do not have to remain. We are not the representatives of a static philosophy, but members of an organic community which is flexible enough to accommodate itself to the various and changing needs of its members. Those men and women who fought for religious freedom across Britain 200 years ago, would hardly recognise the Unitarianism of Britain today, and would certainly not recognise the Unitarianism practised in the United States. On both sides of the Atlantic we have changed more than any other religious group, and not always for the better. And change is needed now. If we are to survive, we must develop a comprehensive religious system which is intellectually stimulating enough to satisfy the mind in its healthful moments of quiet reflection, but which also has the emotional power to help us through those inevitable periods when our lives are beset by turbulence. If we can successfully marry the two – and I honestly believe that we are beginning to marry them, that we are starting to do what Rilke calls 'the heart-work' – we can help to change the religious consciousness of Britain.

The Rev Bill Darlison is president of the Unitarian General Assembly. Photo illustration from a John Hewerdine image.

Executive Committee Key Messages

Executive Committee 15/16 November 2013 – Key Messages

1. Launch of the Red Cross Philippines Typhoon Appeal

The Executive Committee agreed to issue an appeal to all congregations, districts, affiliated societies and individual Unitarians for financial support for the victims of the Philippines Typhoon. The Appeal has been launched with the Red Cross and all the money will be immediately available to the Disaster Emergency Committee (DEC) Fund. The Appeal recognises the contribution of Clara Barton Fund who was a founding member of the American Red Cross and Universalist and has been specially created for Unitarians to donate to Emergency appeals.

Donations by cheque should be sent to:

Laura Deacon

British Red Cross,

44 Moorfields, London, EC2Y 9AL

Cheques should be made payable to British Red Cross with 'Clara Barton Typhoon Appeal' clearly marked on the back, or alternatively donations can be made online by following the link on the GA website homepage.

2. Millennium Fund Grants

Two Millennium Fund grants were awarded to congregations for growth initiatives. Oldham Unitarian Chapel was awarded £5,686.80 towards equipment as part of their £58,000 project to open a One World Café. Pepper Hill Unitarian Chapel in Shelf, Halifax was awarded £250 for installation of an illuminated Flaming Chalice on the end of their building to raise their profile as part of a wider communications initiative.

The Millennium Fund helps to support projects that promote – directly or indirectly – spiritual and/or numerical growth within the Unitarian Movement and before making any applications congregations are encouraged to discuss their proposal with the Chief Officer.

3. Youth Strategy Group

The Executive Committee agreed to establish a Youth Strategy Group with the remit of developing an overall strategy for work with children, young people and young adults within the Unitarian Movement which is seen as crucial to our future. Current arrangements for programmes in these areas, such as the National Youth Programme, will remain unchanged. The Youth Strategy Group

will have five members and anyone who has an interest in finding out more about participating in important strategic work is invited to contact the Chief Officer.

4. Finance

Initial indications show that the financial position of the General Assembly at the year end (30 September 2013) is positive with finances being in balance with costs being controlled. The Annual Accounts are in preparation and will also show substantial growth in the market value of the investments of the General Assembly. This is an excellent performance in an unstable economic climate.

5. Expectations of Competencies for Ministers of the General Assembly

A proposal setting out the competencies expected for Ministers to achieve before being admitted to the Roll of Ministers with probationary status was received from the Ministry Strategy Group and considered by the Executive Committee. The members of the Ministry Strategy Group were commended for their work on producing the proposal. Given the significance of the proposal it was agreed that some further refinement was necessary before it could finally be approved as the policy of the General Assembly.

6. Vice-Presidency

The Executive Committee was not yet in a position to recommend a nominee for the post of Vice-President of the General Assembly for 2014/15 and will seek further nominations. They also considered a proposal from the Manchester District Association that the principle of the Presidency alternating from a lay person to a minister each year be ended.

7. Appointments

The following appointments were approved:
Ministry Strategy Group – Rev Daniel Costley. Rev Margaret Kirk was thanked for her contribution to the work of the Ministry Strategy Group.
Nightingale Centre Management Committee – Sue Cooper
Sustentation Fund – Joan Cook and Louise Rogers as Executive Committee nominees. Rev David Usher was thanked for serving on the Sustentation Fund.

Stop recruiting children for war

At the start of commemorations of the centenary of the start of World War I, religious leaders – including Unitarian Chief Officer Derek McAuley have asked the Ministry of Defence to stop recruiting child soldiers.

The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, the Bishops of the Church in Wales and the Church of Scotland are among the signatories of an open letter to the Ministry of Defence calling for an end to the recruitment of under-18s. The signatories, which also include Quaker, Catholic, Baptist, and Methodist groups, call on the MoD to raise the recruitment age as a 'fitting memorial' to the thousands of young soldiers killed in World War I. The preparation of the letter was co-ordinated by Child Soldiers International.

Derek said: "The former Faith and Public Issues Commission of the General Assembly expressed its opposition to under-18s in the armed forces and highlighted this issue to Parliament in 2011 and it is pleasing that we appear to be seeing some progress with the announcement of a review".

The letter said, in part:

At this time we remember those killed and afflicted in the First World War, including Servicemen and women. Among these we lament the deaths of the very youngest, many of whom had barely emerged from childhood. In so doing, we turn our thoughts to the young men and women serving in the British armed forces today, and question the Ministry of Defence's continued reliance on teenagers to fill some of the most dangerous armed forces roles ...

While we do not all hold the same views on the military, we are united in respecting past and present Servicemen and Servicewomen and we are united in opposing the recruitment of children. We call for the minimum recruitment age to be returned to 18 years. This would be a fitting memorial to those thousands who, whether unlawfully recruited as minors during the First World War or recruited to fight in other conflicts, were exposed to death, injury and trauma that no child should ever experience.

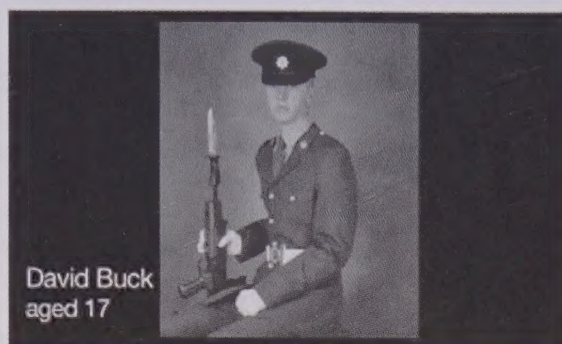
The letter was made public on the same day that Child Soldiers International released new analysis of MoD figures which demonstrates plummeting enlistment levels among 16-year-olds and rising drop-out rates from training. The research finds that:

- In 2012, just 880 16-year-olds enlisted in the Army, 40% fewer than the year before (1,470) and just a quarter of the number enlisted a decade earlier (3,600)
- The dramatic fall in intake has been matched by rising drop-out rates. Of all the 16-year-olds recruited by the Army last year, figures show that nearly half (410) left during training.
- The number of 17-year-olds has also fallen steadily,

theguardian

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British army criticised for recruiting 16-year-olds - video



Britain is one of just 19 countries that still recruit 16-year-olds to the armed forces. A new report claims that younger recruits are more likely to suffer from PTSD, alcohol problems and suicide than those who join as adults. This video tells the story of David Buck who joined the army at 17 but now feels he was conned by misleading recruitment marketing

A video on the Guardian newspaper's website tells the stories of some uping recruits. See it at: <http://bit.ly/JCTI5L>

with about a third as many joining the forces last year (1,550) as were enlisted a decade earlier (5,035).

- Non-officer armed forces recruits enlisting in Scotland and Wales in the year 2011/2012 were, on average, six months younger than those enlisting in England. Secondary schools and colleges in Scotland and Wales also received disproportionately high numbers of visits from armed forces compared to their equivalents in England.

Despite publicly denying any plans to review the recruitment age policy, the MoD's recent response to the Defence Committee's inquiry on the Education of Service Personnel revealed that it has instructed the Army to conduct a cost-benefit analysis

of its recruitment of minors. This study could lead to the end of a practice which leaves the UK with the joint lowest legal recruitment age in the world.

Former Minister for the Armed Forces Sir Nick Harvey welcomed the review, but expressed reservations about its scope. "I am pleased that the MoD has agreed to conduct a review of this policy but it must be independent, transparent and thorough. The time is right to look at under-18 recruitment again. It should not be limited to just the financial costs of training and recruitment, but must seriously examine the personal costs borne by recruits who enlist at this age – including in relation to their long-term welfare and employability" he said.

Richard Clarke, Director of Child Soldiers International, said "It's time for the MoD to recognise what more and more young people and their parents are realising – that enlisting at 16 is not in their best interests. Army training does not give young people what they need to succeed in today's economy, especially in terms of qualifications. During the First World War the minimum age for recruitment and conscription was 18, with deployment at 19. To be recruiting 16-year-olds a century later makes no sense at all."

The longer duration of training for minors and their greater likelihood of dropping out make recruiting them extremely costly to the taxpayer. In 2010-11 the annual cost was approximately £90 million more than if only adults were recruited; the latest drop-out figures will have driven this excess cost upwards.

Child Soldiers International is an international human rights research and advocacy organisation seeking to end the military recruitment and the use in hostilities, in any capacity, of any person under the age of 18. For more information, see: www.child-soldiers.org

For the full text of the letter and a list of signatories, see: bit.ly/1hgDBpT

View a Guardian video on British child soldiers at: <http://bit.ly/JCTI5L>

Real and imagined Mandela-spotting

Forgive me but I cannot resist the impulse to join in the celebration of the life of Nelson Mandela with joy, even fun. Watching people dancing at the news of the great man's death takes a little getting used to for 'buttoned-up' British, but that is the African way. The world media has been awash with pictures and tributes, and the urge to add my little contribution is too great to hold back. In 2002, Celia and I travelled to Cape Town for the induction of the Rev Gordon Oliver. Enjoying a little tourism we came across a booth offering spurious but irresistible photo-opportunities such as this one, a seeming welcome from the then President to this beautiful city. Yes, it is a complete fake; I didn't really meet him. I can only hope that Madiba would forgive me. He had a good sense of humour. I love the fact that he often described himself as "an unemployed pensioner with a criminal record." I can't even claim that, unless you count a couple of speeding tickets.



Don't believe your eyes. The camera can lie!

* * *

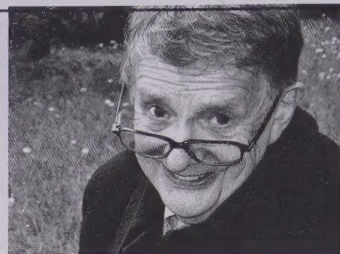
A valid claim to have met Mandela can be made by the Rev Gordon Oliver, who, prior to becoming Cape Town's Unitarian Minister had been an anti-apartheid city councillor and eventually Mayor. He acquired his criminal record, at least in theory, when, as Mayor, he took part in a banned anti-apartheid march. At the end of it he addressed the crowd of thousands through a megaphone from the balcony of City Hall, and bestowed upon them all the freedom of the city. Soon after, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and led a triumphant march into Cape Town. Gordon welcomed him to City Hall with a hug and ushered him to that same balcony to make his first public speech as a free man. You can see Gordon's own modest telling of this. Go to <http://bit.ly/JKpPQz> or search *Gordon Oliver Unitarian/Universalist* on YouTube. Or, for an objective journalist's account, see <http://bit.ly/1c6Wefv>



Gordon Oliver, as Mayor of Cape Town, with Nelson Mandela

Funny Old World

By
John Midgley



Unitarian-spotting continued in 2013. In December, BBC TV's *Gardener's World* visited Beatrix Potter's Lake District cottage garden at Hill Top. Presenter Carol Klein's northern accent described it all as 'woondafull!' A *Mastermind* contestant had a go at the life of Elizabeth Gaskell, and on *University Challenge* the novelist, war poet and former mayor of Norwich, RH Mottram (1883-1971) got a mention. Protégé and biographer of John Galsworthy, he was President of the Unitarian General Assembly during World War II. Also, my bedtime reading of a biography of Michael Foot mentioned Reginald Sorensen (1881 – 1971), pacifist Labour MP and Unitarian minister who ended up as Baron Sorensen of Leyton. Was he our last Unitarian member of the House of Lords? Not one of the above was described, in what I saw or read, as Unitarian. However, our public profile is getting a boost. As I write, the Rev Jim Corrigan is booked to appear on BBC Radio 4 *Thought for the Day*. This 'first' has come about because Tim Berners-Lee (of World Wide Web fame) is acting as guest editor of the programme. It's on Boxing Day, also known as the Feast of St Stephen who was the first Christian martyr, stoned to death for alleged blasphemy (see *Acts* chap 7). Let's hope this is not an omen.

* * *

The year past saw the death aged 97 years of Rev. Ferenc Nagy (pronounced 'nodge', it means 'large'), Unitarian minister of renown in the Transylvania region of Romania. Known as 'Feribaçi', 'uncle Feri', he had a life-long ministry which included the appalling privations of the communist era. He did manage to obtain permission to spend some months in the 1970s at Unitarian College Manchester as a Sharpe Hungarian Scholar and valued this and other international contacts enormously. He and his congregation, along with many others, received help and support from British and other far-off Unitarians. Notable among these was our Urmston congregation, who acquired an old ambulance and filled it with supplies of food, clothing and medication. Volunteers drove it to Transylvania where Uncle Feri ran a free-of-charge clinic in his vestry. A small team of local doctors undertook diagnoses and dispensed medication to those unable to afford it, including the despised gypsy community. Frances Teagle of Urmston and others raised money and paid a series of visits following the nightmare Ceausescu years, transporting clothing, coffee, chocolates, toiletries and plastic buckets of pain-killers (there being none available to the general public) as well as family planning aids, some of which were probably illegal; and not forgetting the 'friendly gifts' to keep the border guards looking the other way. More 'illegal' activities to help the oppressed? Mandela would surely have approved. Uncle Feri never forgot this help, and paid a joyful return visit to Urmston some years later, with a stay at Great Hucklow too.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Why I left Unitarians for 'atheist church'

By Larry Bode

My own mind is my church.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.

It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief, if I may so express it, that mental lying has produced in society.

When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity of his mind, as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe, he has prepared himself for commission of every other crime.

— Thomas Paine 'Age of Reason'

For some time now as a Religious Humanist, I have felt excluded at the more traditional Unitarian services, common in the North West of England.

I have had the privilege of leading many services over two decades, but have often compromised my own beliefs in making them acceptable to all. I decided to investigate and subsequently join the British Humanist Association. I was therefore intrigued by a meeting between the Unitarians of Cross Street Chapel and Greater Manchester Humanists in autumn 2012.

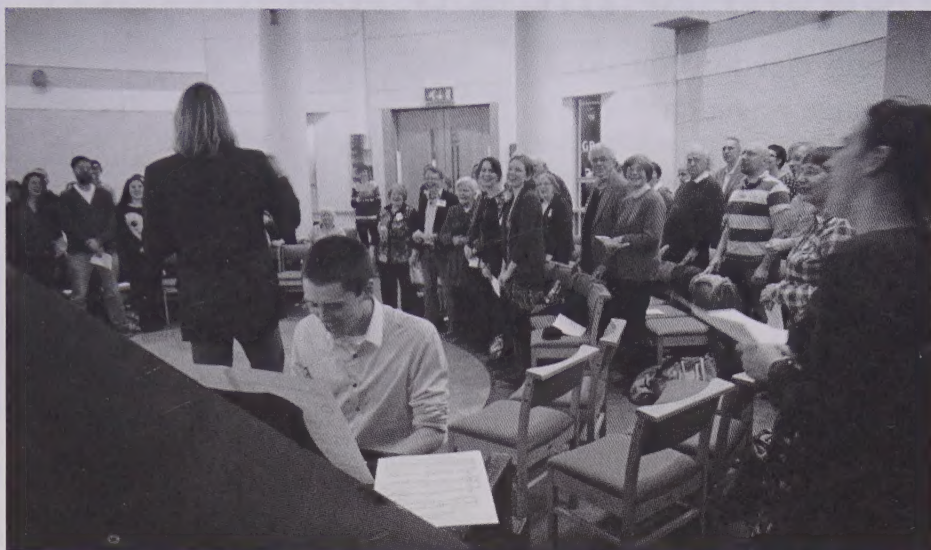
The Unitarians suggested that Humanists did not have a spiritual dimension to their worldview. The Humanists claimed, quite rightly, that they too were very spiritual people. One Humanist yearned for a weekly gathering to celebrate the joy of living; to consider the plight of humankind. There could be a guest speaker; there might be a choir singing about the beauty of the world, and the kindness of people.

I thought that sounds like a church? What is even more strange is that Humanist Vice President Professor A C Grayling has even written a book, called 'The Good Book', suitable for such gatherings – full of advice and stories illustrating decent living.

Shortly after that meeting, I noticed in the press that such a gathering had taken place in London. Not organised by the Humanists, but by secularists. Known as 'The Sunday Assembly'. By chance I met one of the founders of The Sunday Assembly, stand-up comedian Sanderson Jones, at a British Humanist Association Conference.

He explained that he had always enjoyed the experience of church particularly on special occasions such as Christmas with the joyful carol singing and the warm feeling of community. The difficulty for him was the 'God bit' and the fabulous stories from the scriptures. If only there was a church, he thought, which had all the admirable components of a church service without the theology.

(The philosopher Alain de Botton expresses similar sentiments in his book 'Religion for Atheists'.) Together with fellow comedian Pippa Evans, Sanderson Jones decided to start The Sunday Assembly in Islington. This was successful and



Sanderson Jones (back to camera) led the first Manchester Sunday Assembly which was held at Cross Street Unitarian Chapel. Photo provided by Larry Bode

further gatherings were organised, attracting ever increasing numbers. They are now held every two weeks at Conway Hall regularly attracting congregations of over 200.

My wife and I were keen to organise an Assembly in Manchester so we were pleased to hear Sanderson planned to lead the inaugural services of new Assemblies where the most interest was demonstrated. Using the social media, Facebook and Twitter and by contacting local Humanist and secularist groups we soon collected the names of over 200 interested people. We were delighted to be at Conway Hall when Sanderson announced that Manchester was to be one of the chosen cities. The inaugural 'Sunday Assembly Manchester' took place on 30 October and was featured on the BBC Breakfast Show.

The service broadly used the format followed by the London Assembly, which is rousing pop tunes, a poet, a speaker with a suitable message, a non-religious equivalent of the 'Kiss of Peace', a period for quiet thought, a short address by the MC, and some charitable event.

In Manchester we had a local all-girl choir who opened the service with Elbow's 'One Day like This'. Our 'hymns' included 'Celebration' and Queen's 'Don't Stop Me now'. Our speaker was Colin Parry, whose son Tim was murdered in Warrington by the IRA. He talked about the Tim Parry/Jonathan Ball Foundation for Peace, an organisation supporting victims of political violence and terrorism. Eighty people attended the inaugural meeting. This increased to 120 at the second meeting. Enquiries suggest numbers will increase for further gatherings.

The motto adopted by the Sunday Assembly is 'Live Better, Help Often, Wonder More'.

I believe it provides an opportunity for people to gather, wonder at the universe, help their fellow beings and to consider how they can live better decent lives. Although it is a godless and scripture-less organisation, many with religious beliefs attend (the leader of Sunday Assembly Brighton describes himself as Christian).

Unitarians may not necessarily agree with the Sunday Assembly but I feel that there is much they can learn from this organisation.

Larry Bode lives in the Manchester area.

Letters to the Editor

EC puts election concerns on January agenda

To the Editor:

The Executive Committee of the Unitarian General Assembly (EC) is grateful to the Rev Andrew Hill for his instructive, constructive and provocative article in *The Inquirer*, published on 23 November. The article offers a concise and very useful chronicle of the previous governance structures and of the process.

As Andrew implies it was not surprising the 2006 attracted a large number of candidates following the Task Force discussions and the start of a new model and, of course, many of the candidates were members of the previous council. In 2008, just a 2% increase in votes returned but it has been disturbing to see a lower take-up of the democratic opportunity since then. The EC and the independent group that organises the elections, whilst sharing Andrew's concern, were pleased that a healthy number of candidates stood for the 2012 election. The EC already has an item on its January agenda to review the progress in our communication following the facilitated consultation in November 2012 at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester. This item will be expanded so that the EC can give full consideration to the comments raised in Andrew Hill's article. Therefore, as Convenor I am replying in a 'holding capacity' until after the meetings later this month.

Some of the points suggested are already in place and District Secretaries have been receiving EC Agendas ahead of the EC meetings this year.

We are plainly concerned that there is a feeling of secrecy. This is certainly not intentional, although the movement can feel comfortable that the confidentiality of the EC's deliberations is not questioned.

As Convenor it comes to me not only to answer criticisms but also to support and, when necessary, defend the EC. EC members are all volunteers, all different, and work diligently for our movement. We do not flinch from making difficult decisions, no matter how unpopular this may make us. In the most difficult financial crisis in



recent memory, the EC has maintained the General Assembly's fiscal stability with precision; it is working with the Strategy Groups to establish new processes to secure the future of our movement and it seeks to respond to all genuine and constructive invitations to help our congregations grow.

We look positively at Andrew Hill's timely invitation to prepare for the next elections at the end of 2014, and please be assured that we will respond in greater detail after our January meeting.

The Rev Martin Whitell

Convenor

Executive Committee of the Unitarian General Assembly

Look to first election report for advice

To the Editor:

I read with interest Andrew Hill's article on the EC. (*The Inquirer*, 23 November) I have no wish to enter into discussion on how the EC presents information on its deliberations – I am sure there will be many opinions on this – but as the Chair of the first Electoral Panel I have of course observed – and been concerned by – how differently things have been organised in subsequent elections.

I think the key to the good turnout in 2006 has to be that the first Electoral Panel sent voting papers directly to individuals. This individual approach was not universally appreciated but the resulting percentage take-up, compared with later elections, does seem to

indicate that the effort and care we put into communication and involvement with individuals in this way did encourage a good response. The larger numbers of voting papers distributed for later elections puzzles me as I was unaware that our quota membership was increasing to such an extent, but perhaps it is because batches of papers were sent to secretaries using figures not checked by the panel, rather than the meticulous individual checking that was carried out in 2005.

It is eight years ago, but somewhere in the Essex Hall archives there is a very large folder containing all the information on how we managed the process; there is also a report which provides a résumé of our work and includes the challenges we faced and our recommendations on maintaining the system. I have no idea whether anyone has ever referred to this useful file or even read the report, which could have assisted the administration of future elections, and, sadly, I have seen no indication that any of the recommendations have been acted upon.

Valerie Walker

Chair, Electoral Panel 2005-06

BUYAN plans meeting

The next meeting of BUYAN (British & Irish Unitarian Young Adult Network) will be held at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester on Saturday 1 February from 11-5.30. There will be social activities from 11 and the main part of the day kicking off at 12. The group is for Young Unitarian Adults between the ages of 18 and 35 inclusive.

We'll be exploring the theme of "What does it mean to be a Young Unitarian Adult?" Bursaries are available to help with the travel costs of those who would otherwise be unable to attend.

For further details, see our Facebook group BUYAN (Unitarians 18-35) or contact Andrew or John on contactbuyan@gmail.com.

Remember 'respect for all creation'

By Sandra Busell

It was like a breath of fresh air to read Feargus O'Connor's article in the 23 November edition of *The Inquirer*. The publications of various religions often forget about the (non-human) animals with whom we are privileged to share this planet. The excerpt from a report regarding the interfaith service for animals was also a welcome read.

Feargus O'Connor writes that most 'ordinary' people believe that animals can communicate pain or distress. Perhaps the word 'know' rather than 'believe' would be more appropriate. It would only be ignorance on our part to deny something so obvious. However, even if animals did not 'communicate' their pain and distress, it still deserves to be acknowledged.

The Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches of 2001 states it is "to promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and *respect for all creation*; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

The majority of 'food animals' (in itself, an unsatisfactory description) are cooped up in cruel conditions, the factory farm being the animal equivalent of the concentration camp. They are often beaten, hit and kicked during transport on their way to the obscenity that is the slaughterhouse, where there is no so-called 'humane slaughter'. The second page of



The Rev Feargus O'Connor visited Carla Lane at her animal sanctuary several years ago.

Photo provided by James Barry

Feargus O'Connor's excellent article is headed, "if animals feel, should we care more?". There is no "if" about it. Just one of the many ways in which animals show their feelings is the way in which a dairy cow and her calf pine for each other when they are parted; the calf is taken from her mother either immediately after birth or, at most, within a few days of being born. There is even more cruelty in the dairy industry than in the meat industry. Another example is that as animals wait their turn to be killed in the slaughterhouse, some die of a heart attack, brought on by sheer terror. The cruel conditions in which 'food animals' are kept, the way they are treated (or rather mistreated) throughout their miserable lives and the way they are slaughtered means that if we have a 'respect for all creation', then, surely, all those who believe this must recognise the need to consume an animal-free diet. Added to this, the Genesis phrase 'have dominion over' which so many use as an excuse to eat

animal flesh is a mistranslation anyway. The correct translation of how we are required to treat (non-human) animals is to 'take good care of them and protect them from harm'. Even if 'have dominion over' were the correct translation, that still does not give us the right to eat or otherwise cruelly-treat, exploit, harm, or kill (non-human) animals for our own selfish whims. We do not *need* to wear leather or fur, nor do we need to torment animals for our entertainment (eg circuses, hunting, shooting and fishing, etc.).

For those still not convinced that a non-human diet is essential to showing "respect for all creation", there are some excellent films and videos on line that are well worth watching. The following two are thought-provoking examples:

The multi-award winning documentary film, "The Witness" (not to be confused with the film "Witness").

Available on the Tribe of Heart website, (www.tribeofheart.org) it is about a man who had his life changed forever after he was smitten by a kitten.

The Gary Yourofsky lecture, (www.adaptt.org/bio.html), became the most-watched lecture in the Holy Land and includes the damage done to our health and the planet as well as the suffering of animals, due to an animal-based diet.

By showing animals compassion, by choosing not to eat them, comes with a big bonus, the benefit for our own health.

Dr Neal Barnard, the founder of Physicians for Responsible Medicine, has given a series of lectures, which can be viewed on line, in which he discusses the many benefits of an animal-free diet and the many dangers of an animal-based diet. Cruelty to animals is reason enough to not eat them, but in making that choice, we help ourselves and the planet too. Also, there are so many delicious vegan foods available, there really are no disadvantages; an animal-free, cruelty-free diet ticks all the positive boxes.

Sandra Busell sends her vegan good wishes from Edinburgh.

Ruth Healey is missed



Ruth Healey

all the way from Sussex.

Ruth was a regular visitor to Great Hucklow, where she would renew friendships with Unitarians from other parts. She served on our Church Management Committee and as Church Secretary until she retired at the age of 80 in 2000 and was a regular attender at Sunday worship until frailty intervened. She had a lively wit and was one of those rare people who actually listened when you were talking to her. Our congregation will be the poorer for her passing.

— Maurice Large

Tribute to 'Hindu-Unitarian' in Bristol

By Carla Contractor

The year 2013 was exactly 180 years after the Rajah Rammohun Roy died of meningitis in Bristol. He was an early and most influential reformer in the India of the East India Co. He was renowned there for his social, religious, educational and fiscal reforms, and for his three early Indian newspapers in Bengali, Persian and English – he was also a polymath! From 1821 on he called himself a Hindu-Unitarian, and indeed started and funded the first Unitarian meeting in Calcutta with its Minister, William Adam. Of all his reforms, his founding of the Brahmo Samaj, a theistic Hindu reform movement was the closest to his heart and modelled on the Unitarian movement. His subsequent joining the Unitarians in his home city was a political and religious gesture towards religious reform for someone born a Hindu Kulin Brahmin.

The Rajah came to England in April 1831, and lived in London for two and a half years, much of this time in Bedford Square with the brothers of David Hare who founded Calcutta University. He fought off an attempt by orthodox Brahmins to reinstate the rite of sati, he obtained some of the withheld taxes for the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II, and he gave much advice to a Privy Council of Parliament on the better governance of India. By then he was exhausted, and was invited to Bristol by Lant Carpenter, the Unitarian Minister at Lewins Mead to recuperate. He came in early Sept. 1833 probably already ill with meningitis. He died slowly and painfully over the following three weeks. He was first buried in a private garden but nine years later was reinterred in Arnos Vale Cemetery in



A tiny ivory bust of the rajah, a bust copied in miniature by Benjamin Cheverton from a full-size marble bust of the rajah by George Clarke Photo by Amalin Dutt

Bristol.

The cemetery Trust holds an annual Commemoration of the Rajah on or near to his date of death, 27 September, which is organised by a Trustee, Carla Contractor. In 2013, 100 people came to this, roughly half were local Unitarians, whilst the others were either British Indians living nearby or Brahmo Samajis, mainly from London. They have long worshiped at Golders Green Meeting in Hoop Lane – the GGU Meeting.

The keynote speaker, Dr David Wilson, unveiled an important art discovery. This was a tiny ivory bust of the rajah, a bust copied in miniature by Benjamin Cheverton from a full-size marble bust of the rajah by George Clarke, the eminent British sculptor of the day. It is extra-ordinary that such a find should surface now, it certainly astonished the audience to see this three dimensional portrait. The BBC came up from London to film the unveiling; it was also filmed for another event a week later at the Indian centre for Cultural Relations in Kolkata.

Other speakers at the event were Yvonne Aburrow, who spoke on the life of the Rev William Adam; she had researched and detailed his life clearly and movingly. Prasun Sonwalkar was unfortunately ill so could not expound on the Rajah's three newspapers. Carla Contractor revealed that the rajah's home village Radhanagar in West Bengal had built a replica chattri or funeral monument copied from the original monument in Arnos Vale and Swagata Ghosh spoke on the rajah's views on immigration by the British to India, a neat parallel to the present debate on immigration in Britain. The Rev. Lindy Latham offered prayers and Bernard Omar President of the Bristol Frenchay meeting offered the Universal prayer for Peace to finish the service. Then a good hot Indian meal was enjoyed by all, over meeting old friends and discovering new contacts. Flowers were laid by the chattri and a Brahmo prayer offered and one of the Rajah's hymns was sung most movingly.

Carla Contractor is a member of Bristol Unitarians.

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